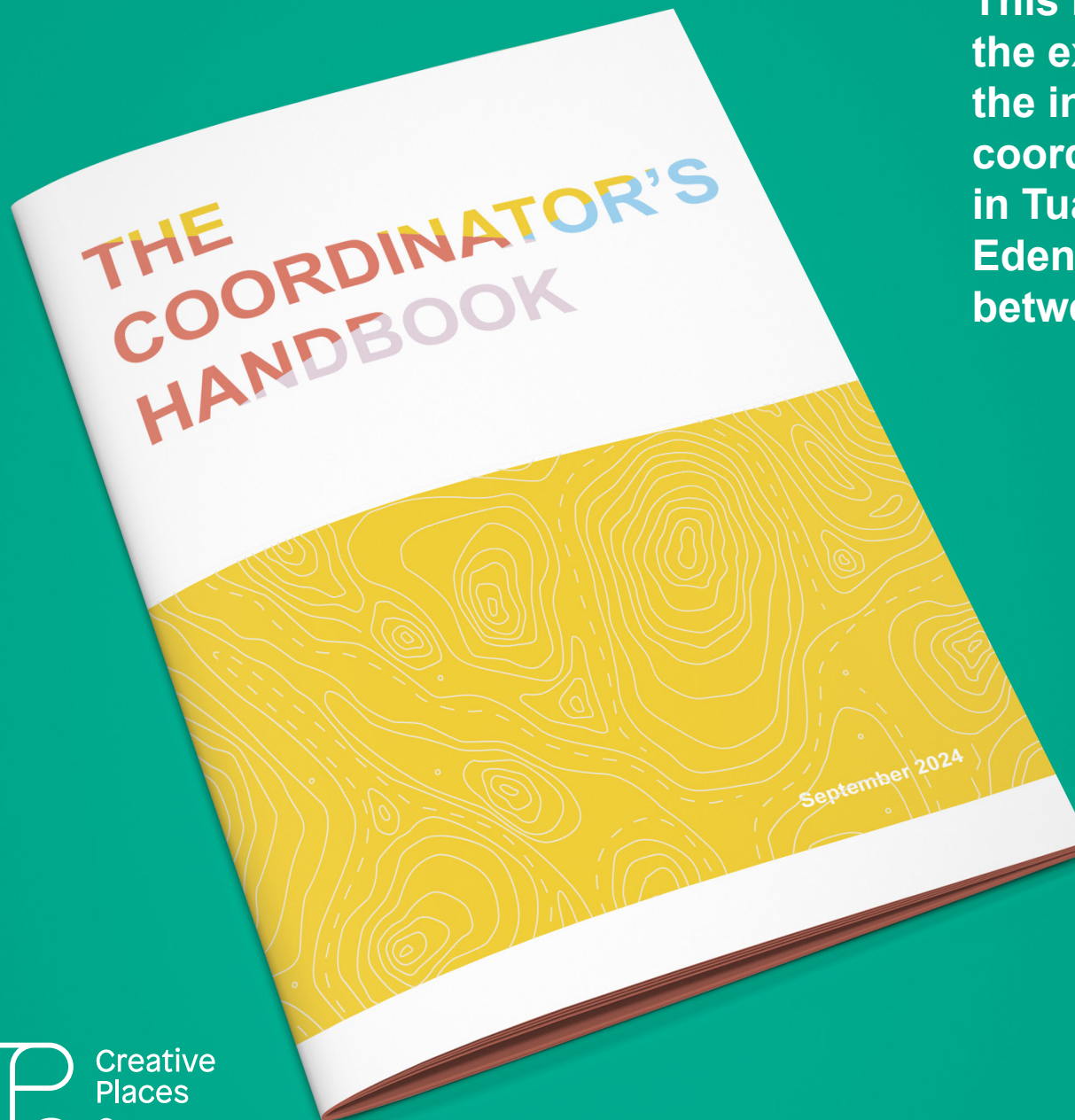




This handbook has grown from the experiences and learning of the initial cohort of Creative Places coordinators, leading projects in Tuam, Athy, Bagenalstown, Edenderry, and West Cork between 2020 and 2024.

Each of these projects is distinctive and individual — responding to the different needs of their communities. Nonetheless, the coordinators all recognised that there have been commonalities to their experiences that might be of use in guiding the development of future projects, and informing the work of future coordinators.

This handbook, therefore, shares some of the key reflections from this cohort, created at a moment of pause and reflection at the end of this first phase. It offers a roadmap, of sorts — a sense of 'here's what lies ahead'. The universal hope of those who fed into this document was that it might offer a sense of solidarity, of collegiality and support to those at an earlier stage of their journey in creative placemaking and socially engaged arts.

Reflections from across the Creative Places network were collated into eight key themes.

01. Agree your values

At the beginning, take time to understand the values that will shape and guide the project, and to consider what success will look like. This can be a collective process, offering an opportunity to take time to really examine what your community wants and needs. As you progress, these values will help guide your decisions, manage disagreement, and give focus and clarity to your role. Look to your values to inform every aspect of the work you're doing, from the practicalities of delivery to partnerships, priorities and identity.

Making values the focus of your work, rather than working to a fixed set of deliverables, also gives space for plans to shift and change as you go. But do make sure that all key partners have all signed off on the same set of values, and that you're working to a shared understanding of the direction you're headed. One coordinator found it especially helpful to agree a simple 'objectives and actions' table with key stakeholders, to act as a shared reference point for decision-making, delivery and evaluation.

“*Standing strong in the values of the work gave me the confidence to trust my decisions, to say no to people's expectations of what the work should be, and took the pressure off trying to be everything to everyone.*”

02. Share decision making

It's tempting to assume that community empowerment comes from everyone being involved in every decision, but in reality that can simply lead to stodgy processes and frustratingly slow progress. Instead, think carefully about who gets to make which decisions. Which are yours to make, which belong to others, and how can you make decision-making more equitable across the community? Be clear on your role within the project and the community: not to do everything yourself, but to support and enable, and to widen the pool of people who get a say in what happens.

Building structures that enable decisions to be made collaboratively gives credibility and authority to the activity you deliver. It's much easier to hold firm against those who have come to expect their voices to be prioritised if you have a clear remit for your activity from your community. There are other advantages to sharing the load: building local capacity then stepping back a little often creates the space for more leaders to emerge from within the community, building long term resilience for the work.

03. Start small

Investing in small-scale activity, especially in the early stages of your project, can be golden. Smaller projects allow you to get moving quickly, raise the visibility of the project in your community, and demonstrate that money and support is available. Getting lots of smaller activities up and running helps you understand what skills there are within your community, allows fledgling ideas to be tested and refined, and helps you to explore a range of possibilities for what the project might become. They also provide a lower-stakes testing ground for people to learn to work together, navigate teething problems, and switch direction if things don't go quite as expected.

As things grow over time, building on smaller beginnings means you'll be more confident that your project is responding to the needs of your community, that the work is meaningful and locally resonant, and that money is going where it's needed most.

“If we'd started with a big flagship project we'd have faced all these questions about 'why are you spending so much money on that?'. Gradually building up to there, via lots of little projects, helped guide us through those questions. By the time we got to the big investments we were confident in our approach.”

04. Build yourself a team

This can be lonely work, and building a network of support is vital. Coordinators all reflected on moments where they'd wondered "*is it just me?*", and found comfort, solidarity and support from working with others who could reassure them that it almost certainly isn't! Find people who really understand the work, who 'get' what you're trying to do, and who share your values.

Given the diversity of management structures across the network, your 'colleagues' might come from within your organisation, or from partner organisations, steering groups or committees. You'll also have access to a network of other Creative Places coordinators, who will become a vital source of advice, experience and empathy. Wherever you find them, build a network of people who can advise, champion and bolster you.

Make active use of the networks around you to access the support you need, and don't hesitate to pick up the phone when you need advice, help or a listening ear.

“ It can sometimes feel like working to five or six different bosses... each with different priorities (and calendars!). Finding support and solidarity from the network was absolutely vital — it really bolstered me.”

05. Recognise (and work with) conflict

Disagreement and dissent is a constant (and probably inevitable) reality of working in and with communities.

There will always be local politics, resistance, and conflicting ideas of where your focus should be. Tension often occurs because people care deeply about their place and its people: it can be an asset — though often a challenging one to manage.

Create mechanisms that welcome dissent, involve multiple viewpoints, and that give people practical ways to work through a variety of ideas at once. Getting going with multiple small activities offers you a practical route through tensions and difficulties, and offers a grounding for future decisions.

Trying out lots of new ideas in practice allows you to develop a clearer sense of what the programme needs to become (as opposed to what people expect it to be), and to work with the diversity of people and ideas within a place. Sticking with a place for the long term allows relationships to change and grow — keep the door open for people who might initially resist or decline participation to find a way back in.

06. Keep it flexible

Embrace the unknown of the journey — this project is all about testing new ways of working, engaging and connecting. Actively make space for people to experiment and try new things; one coordinator said *“someone trying something new should always be part of the project”*. Keep plans flexible enough to allow activity to emerge organically as you go.

Support people to develop fledgling ideas, and retain enough flexibility in your budget to be able to say yes to good ideas (coordinators variously referred to this as a flexible, reactive or ‘misc’ budget line). Be flexible about the practicalities of what it takes to make things happen, and try to keep systems and processes light enough to make it easy to say yes. Not everything needs to look neat and tidy — some messiness is part of the process.

“Taking your time is well and good, but sometimes people are itching for something to happen. Get started, then keep asking questions: “what next?”, “what else do people want?””

07. Bigger isn’t necessarily better

Resist the temptation (or the pressure) to equate scale with impact. This work is both hyper-local, and ambitious. Building connections between people is vital in an international context of atomisation and conflict, and there is richness to be found in exploring the constellation of connections between the local, national and international.

Resisting the temptation to produce projects at scale, or to constantly grow numbers, allows you to focus on the value of the intimate. Small projects (or activities, or events) create space to focus on the depth of relationships, offer more freedom to experiment and test new ideas, and give you a test bed to build on.

Some things are just good small.

08. Embrace the humanity

This project is about people. Real lives, real connections, real people. Take time to build trust: show your face, drink tea, invest the time. Communities engage with people, not with faceless projects. Say yes, build trust, encourage ideas to grow.

Building connections across communities is an end in itself; new conversations lead to new ideas and new notions of what might be possible. Focus on the journey as much as the destination — change happens from taking time to build a sense of inspiration about what's possible (and what's possible here, now).

“Me and the community were holding each other. You go through the fires together, and that's where the learning happens.”

Creative Places

Creative Places is an Arts Council initiative which aims to connect with people, artists, and places, to allow ideas to develop into creative actions that are inspired by and enrich our island. It is a programme for places around Ireland that have not had opportunities to benefit from sustained investment in the arts and creativity.

The Creative Places Network Services has been managed by Create since its inception in 2021. Create offers tailored support, training, peer networking opportunities and knowledge exchange, contributing to the Creative Places goal of building local arts programmes which will benefit the people who live in these places.

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